William Riker’s
“Liberalism Against Populism”

CMSS seminar, Tuesday 15 October
Liberalism Against Populism

What role does voting play in democracy?

social choice theory \implies \begin{align*}
\text{the liberal view is correct} \\
\text{the populist view is incorrect}
\end{align*}
Motivation

1. How can social choice theory contribute to theories of democracy?
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2. When we apply a theorem from social choice, we need to ask: what do voters think the outcomes are? This prompts the question: what should voters think the outcomes are?
Motivation

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3. Suppose a non-academic asks what do I need to know about social choice theory? why do I need to know about social choice theory?
William Riker

- PhD Harvard 1948
- 1949–1962 Lawrence College, Wisconsin
- 1963–1993 University of Rochester, New York
- founded positive political theory
- by 2003 his work had been cited over 3700 times by over 2000 scholars in over 500 different journals
- author of Liberalism Against Populism (1982)
Democracy, voting

Democracy:

- popular participation in government
- equality (at the ballot box, before the law, etc)
- liberty
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Voting is “at the heart” of democracy.

“What does voting establish?”
Democracy, voting

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Voting is “at the heart” of democracy.

“What does voting establish?”

There are two views: liberalism and populism.
Liberalism

We vote only to control elected officials.

Riker: “Voting generates liberty by restraining officials.”

James Madison (1751–1836)
Populism

We vote to establish the will of the electorate.

We embody the will of the electorate in the actions of elected officials.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)
Social choice theory

- cycles
- Arrow’s Theorem
- we can get different outcomes from different ‘good’ voting procedures
- agenda manipulation
- manipulative voting

Riker has plenty of examples.
Social choice theory

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Voting is inaccurate and meaningless.

The populist view cannot be correct.
Suppose we hold an election for some office.

A is the incumbent.
Suppose we hold an election for some office.

A is the incumbent.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>A is good</th>
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<td>A is not rejected</td>
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the people cannot rule as a corporate body

officials rule, and they do not represent some indefinable popular will

It would help to have a citizenry aware of the emptiness of the populist interpretation
Gerry Mackie

- worked in the forestry industry
- PhD Chicago 2000
- since 2005, Professor at UCSD
Liberalism: voting generates liberty by restraining officials.

Populism: we vote to establish the will of the electorate.

Madison: restraining officials is necessary for democracy.

Rousseau: there is a difference between 'the general will' and 'the will of all'.
Democracy Defended

Liberalism: voting generates liberty by restraining officials.

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Democracy Defended

Liberalism: voting generates liberty by restraining officials.

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Rousseau: there is a difference between ‘the general will’ and ‘the will of all’.
Suppose an electorate rejects a bad incumbent.

Could this rejection be ‘the will’ of the electorate?
Suppose an electorate rejects a bad incumbent.

Could this rejection be ‘the will’ of the electorate?

Riker

- rejects populism if it might ever fail
- accepts liberalism if it might ever work

Is this reasonable?
Social choice theory

- cycles
  - are empirically improbable

- agenda manipulation is rare
- manipulative voting is sometimes beneficial
- genuine preferences emerge over time

Riker has plenty of examples, and Mackie rejects all of them.
Social choice theory

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  violating IIA can be rational
  is UD reasonable?
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- we can get different outcomes from different ‘good’ voting procedures
  - ‘good’ procedures frequently yield similar results
Social choice theory

▶ cycles
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  ‘good’ procedures frequently yield similar results
▶ agenda manipulation
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Social choice theory

- Cycles are empirically improbable.
- Arrow’s Theorem: violating IIA can be rational; is UD reasonable?
- We can get different outcomes from different ‘good’ voting procedures; ‘good’ procedures frequently yield similar results.
- Agenda manipulation is rare.
- Manipulative voting is sometimes beneficial; genuine preferences emerge over time.

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Riker:
 voting is inaccurate and meaningless

\[\text{social choice theory} \implies \text{the liberal view is correct}\]
\[\text{the populist view is incorrect}\]

Mackie:
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a powerful belief that [what Riker calls populism] is impossible and fraudulent creates the situation it defines
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